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THE STUDY CLUB

THE FOURTH CITIZEN IN *JULIUS CAESAR*

Great characters speak for themselves. Minor ones not infrequently need an interpreter. So it is with *dramatis personae*. If it were not enough for Shakespeare to have created Brutus, the patriot, and Cassius, the politician—if additional proof were needed of the author's genius—it might be found in the carefully differentiated portrait of the Fourth Citizen in Act III of *Julius Caesar*.

At first sight the Fourth Citizen appears to be just one out of the conventional stage mob, but rightly thought upon he is much more than this. He is, indeed, a leader of the crowd—a sort of Cassius himself, in his own circle. He is swayed, to be sure, by the orator in the pulpit, as which of us has not been? But he scorns to be led by the chattering crowd at his back, and resents the confusion that makes him miss a single sentence of the speaker.

The advent of Brutus, still wet with the blood of Pompey's conqueror, was the occasion of many boisterous demands for explanation. To Brutus' rhetorically correct but unimpassioned harangue the crowd listened with respectful silence. Convinced they were, but more by the dignity and sincerity of the man than by his logic, which they, doubtless, could ill understand. His balanced clauses and well-rounded periods left them, if not cold, at least only mildly enthusiastic. "The question of his death is enrolled in the capitol"—aye, but the commoners were not likely to put themselves to the trouble of investigation. As to Brutus' real motive, not one of them could appreciate his unselfish patriotism. The height attained by the commoners is well illustrated by the suggestion "Let him be Caesar," a suggestion seconded by the Fourth Citizen, but with the significant correction, "Caesar's *better parts* shall be crowned in Brutus."

Then comes Mark Antony. He plays upon the citizens as young Lucius on his instruments, and they vibrate in tune with his desires. From out that speech, surely one of the most crafty in all Shakespeare, the Fourth Citizen grasps the one convincing argument—not only grasps it but holds it up to the view of his less astute companions—"Marked ye his words? He would not take the crown; therefore 'tis certain he was not ambitious." That the personality of the Fourth

Citizen is recognized by the other commoners is evident enough from the remainder of this scene. He it is who stills the crowd as Antony again begins to speak; he, who twice demands to hear the will, and is followed in the demands by the voices of the others. He forms the ring for the speaker when he descends to expose the body of Caesar, and not until the Fourth Citizen has made an open accusation, "O traitors, villains," dare the others speak of active revenge.

But it is in the scene following that the Fourth Citizen rises to the height of inspiration. The mischief has been set afoot; the conspirators are already in flight before the enraged populace. From the beginning of Act III there has been not a moment of relief from the dramatic tension, a tension shared by everyone in the play except—of all people—Caesar himself. There is needed a scene in lighter vein, a breathing-space, before the tremendous events that are ushered in with the ominous opening words of Act IV, "These many then shall die; their names are pricked," and rush on to the final tragedy on the plains of Philippi. Now a scene purely comic would be out of place. The audience must not be allowed to forget that there is a great crime still unavenged, and yet it must smile while remembering. It is just here that the Fourth Citizen has his inspired moment.

At the beginning of the scene the crowd of citizens, in blind fury over their murdered benefactor, meet one Cinna, a poet. What follows is one of those rare incidents of true comedy, albeit shot through with signs of the storm that is lurking on the next page. Now this Cinna is a friend of Caesar, and indeed is on his way to pay his tribute to the dead, but on learning his name the crowd mistakes him for Cinna the conspirator, because one of the murderers was so named. Rejoiced at finding an object on which to vent their anger, "Tear him to pieces, he's a conspirator!" they cry. "But I'm not Cinna the conspirator," insists the unhappy victim, "I'm Cinna the poet." Are they then to be deprived of their ghastly pleasure? No—the Fourth Citizen, to their relief: "Tear him for his bad verses, tear him for his bad verses."

But there is enough of bloodshed here. It needs not that tragedy to spoil a scene that is essentially comic. Shakespeare takes a "diviner justice," and hustles poor Cinna off the stage in the hands of his tormentors, and if there is murder done, at least we know not. Indeed death might have been the more merciful course. Proof: Ask any conscientious poet to state a preference, public ridicule or annihilation?

W. H. McCREARY